

'Hidden' South Asian Sexualities

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1. Abstract

In drawing from my research on British, Pakistani, Non-heterosexual, Muslim Males (BPNMM) throughout my undergraduate and now masters, this presentation explores South Asian sexualities. **Historically**, it will look at the often-overlooked existence of diverse sexualities prior to **British colonisation**. The poster reconnects with a history that has been **lost** and marginalised through Western **imperialism** and erasure. It goes some way to **challenge** South Asia as a place where sexuality is suppressed. In doing so, the change in Western attitudes towards sexualities is positioned as a **hypocritical** development, rooted in neo-liberal and **homonationalist** agendas. Supporting this are extracts from **qualitative** interviews.

Keywords: colonisation, South Asia, sexualities.

2. Introduction

- In 1997, Bhugra was one of the first to note South Asian gays as having “a **foot in each culture**”, without feeling a complete, unconditional sense of **belonging** or **acceptance** in either identity component.
- Socio-culturally, Yip (2004) argues non-heterosexuality is perceived as bringing ‘**sharam**’ (shame) to the family’s izzat (honour)
 - Karma Nirvana, an hour-based abuse charity argue **coercion, forced marriages** and **disownment** aim to compensate for the supposed loss of izzat, as shown within Khan’s (2018) work also.
- Jaspal, Lopes and Rehman (2019) noted stressors, including internalized homophobia and discrimination, may cause **identity threat** and **psychopathology**.
 - Aiming to alleviate these threats, South Asian non-heterosexuals may strategically engage in **compartmentalization** by elevating identity components that are more likely to be accepted contextually.
- Pre-colonial texts, such as the **Kama Sutra** and **Tamil Sangam**, have temporal-specific passages dedicated to non-heterosexual relations at the time these pieces of literature were written (Shah, 2022).



3. Methodology

For the purposes of this research poster for the consortium, I have built on my **primary** research from my undergraduate (BSc Psychology with Counselling) and Masters (by Research in Psychology), with **secondary** research. Though my primary research has focused on Pakistani non-heterosexualities, my interests are currently reconnecting **with post-colonial theories**, beyond borders. This approach recognizes the recency of nationalist bordering.

For my dissertation project, I looked at the experiences of British, Gay, Pakistani, Muslim Males (BGPMM) through an **Interpretative Phenomenological** lens. For this project, I interviewed **six participants** with a semi-structured method. They were recruited through snowballing personal networks, contacting LGBT+ Muslim organizations, such as Hidayah, and social applications (Grindr and Tinder). The **interview schedule** explored identity components, socio-cultures, media and relationships.

In reflecting on the BGPMM project, I noticed some participants **refrained** from identifying with the Gay identity. This led to my current Masters’ work where I am looking at **BPNMM**. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 restrictions were conducted **remotely via MS Teams**. For this project, I recruited **8 BPNMM**. I maintained earlier developed contacts, whilst also creating ‘**professional**’ **social media** accounts to increase **accessibility** by addressing potential participation barriers. For this project, I am taking a **Critical Discourse** approach, looking at BPNMM’s language in constructing their identities, and how they are spoken of.

Throughout both BGPMM and BPNMM datasets, historical and contemporary South Asian sexualities were touched upon.



4. Results

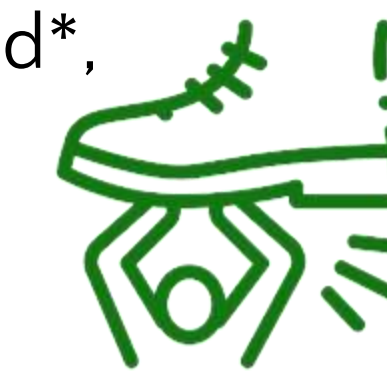
4.1. Homophobic Erasure

- The existence of diverse South Asian sexualities has slowly chipped away with the introduction of **restrictive legislations** throughout the Medieval, Mughal and British Empire (Shah, 2022).
- Whilst researching South Asian sexualities, I came across significant **difficulties in finding resources**. By considering homophobic erasure, this can be explained by **colonial Britain’s** oppressive Offences Against the Person Act of 1861, which legislated sodomy as acts of ‘violence’, punished by life sentences. This Act laid the foundations for Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, **criminalizing sexual intercourse** the British Empire deemed to be against the order of “nature”.
- Beyond sexuality, the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 targeted ‘eunuchs’ (Khawaja Sira, Hijra) specifically. ‘Eunuchs’ is a colonial term referring to those who do not conform to British notions of ‘**masculinity**’ and its expression.
- The above raises the question of both historical and contemporary South Asian sexualities; are they **hidden, hiding** or **erased**?



4.2. Suppression

- After physically, financially, psychologically and verbally abusing Syed*, his brother “*was saying to me “forgive me and er come back, and don’t do those things, coz those things are not really good”*”. Despite attempts to **suppress** Syed’s homosexuality, his brother remained persistent on its suppression and conformation to **heteronormative** standards. There remained an expectation to a heterosexual **marriage** with questions such as “*when are you going to get married?*”.



4.3. Visibility

- In recognizing Syed’s* **diasporic** identity, I asked “*is the societal reaction the same from Pakistani’s, both here (England) and in Pakistan?*”, to which they responded, “*yes, same wherever. It’s bad thing. You can do, but it’s hidden*”. This shows the existence of South Asian non-heterosexuals as one that **has to remain hidden**, as they go on to say “*if communities knew that thing, homosexuality, they used to do bad things with them*”, related to 4.2.
- In considering the impact of **potential** socio-cultural reactions, I asked Yusuf* as they passed Birmingham Pride, why he chose not to participate. Their brief response “image.” captured the **internalized** need to maintain a heterosexual profile. Earlier, they mentioned, “I’ve built an image over the years in society... it wouldn’t be accepted at all”.
- Abdullah’s* grandad touches on an important point once he had to ‘come out’; “*people have come through generations of what you’ve gone through and there wasn’t a name in those days, and they’ve had to marry people but now, there’s a name for it, people say you’re gay, because people are born like that.*” From this, we can take both the **historical, rich existence** of South Asian non-heterosexualities, but also the **recency in identifying** and **labelling** non-heterosexuality.



5. Conclusion

- The rich history of South Asian and diverse sexualities **challenges** notions that position these identities as **mutually exclusive**.
- Contemporary anti-LGBT sentiments can be traced back to British criminalisation. Even if **there was no history** of diverse South Asian sexualities, the **experiences and identities** of contemporary South Asian non-heterosexuals are **valid**.
- Despite Britain’s colonial homophobic legacy, the work of challenging homophobia within our **communities** remains.
- To conclude, Syed* powerfully suggests Pakistan’s decriminalization of non-heterosexuality by responding “*Some people are doing those things by hiding themselves, its okay if they show their sexuality- that we are gay. We are bi. It’s okay.*”
- **Future directions:** to dismantle narratives of incompatibility, **safe spaces** to discuss supposed ‘taboo’ are crucial. Dismantling homophobic notions also lie with **South Asian heterosexuals**. Regarding research, **archival exploration** on historical South Asian non-heterosexuality would be welcome.



6. Support

If you have been impacted, at any point, by the contents of this poster, or know someone who would benefit from support, I strongly suggest you reach out for **affirmative** support, such as **Hidayah** and **Imaan**.

7. Other findings

For findings beyond what’s shared here, see:

- One-stop **LinkTree**, updated regularly: <https://linktr.ee/MIA.xAli>
- **Twitter:** <https://twitter.com/MIAxAlIx>
- **Instagram:** <https://www.instagram.com/mia.xali/>

8. References

- Photo cred: Reid Grahma/TMD
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